

Values, norms and poverty
A CONSULTATION ON WDR 2000/1: POVERTY AND DEVELOPMENT

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**NOTES FOR THE SESSION ON PARTICIPATORY
METHODS OF POVERTY MEASUREMENT**

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Notes for the Session on Participatory Methods of Poverty Measurement

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Participatory methods of poverty assessment have developed fast. In the process they have raised many issues: about concepts, values and the nature of poverty, about professional methodologies, orientations, and perceptions, and about personal behaviour, attitudes and commitment. These bullet points in part address these wider implications of the shift towards more participatory approaches to understanding and attacking poverty.

1. Actual or Likely Emerging Consensus

A. About the Nature and Conditions of “Poverty” and of the Poor

- bad conditions of living and being are multidimensional
- those whose conditions are bad are highly diverse
- the conditions they experience are highly diverse
- the conditions they experience change rapidly
- their means of coping and living are dynamic, diverse and often complex
- their priorities typically vary by type of person, gender, wealth-poverty, age, social group, livelihood strategy, locality, season and other dimensions
- poor people have a far greater capacity to conduct their own appraisals and analysis, presenting their realities, than most educated professionals (self included) have supposed (The evidence is now overwhelming)

B. About Methods of Measurement/Assessment

To learn about, assess, understand and measure the nature and conditions of deprivation and illbeing

- different methods generate different sorts of insight
- different methods are open to different sorts of error and omission
- triangulation through combinations of methods and sources improves quality of insight
- standardised categories and measures set in advance help comparisons but are liable to give distorted views of the realities of poor people and miss much
- participatory approaches, behaviours and methods, especially those known as PRA, can enable poor people to express and analyse the complexity, diversity and dynamism of their realities
- this happens especially through sensitive and unhurried facilitation, “handing over the stick”, and enabling poor people to diagram complex visuals.
- participatory behaviours and methods can also generate numbers
- Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) (Norton and Stephens 1995; Blackburn with Holland 1998; Robb 1998) like those conducted in, for example Ghana (Dogbe 1998), Zambia (Milimo and others 1998), South Africa (May and others 1998), Tanzania and Bangladesh, and other participatory research (e.g. Shah and Bourarach 1995), have revealed or stressed dimensions of deprivation which otherwise might be overlooked or given less attention. Examples (Booth and others 1998: 7-8) include:

- security of life and livelihood as a primary concern
- seasonality of access and of vulnerability
- isolation from services, markets, government institutions and information
- access to curative health as a consistent high priority
- hunger and dietary inadequacy as a distinct dimension of deprivation
- the decline of traditional, and insufficiency of alternative, safety nets

2. Areas Where Consensus Does Not (I think) Yet Exist

A. Participation, power and priorities: whose reality counts?

- Key questions to ask and puzzle over are:
 - Whose words and concepts count?
 - Whose values?
 - Whose appraisal and analysis?
 - Whose needs?
 - Whose concerns and priorities?

Though there is a widespread shift from replying “ours” that is, Those of development professionals, to saying “theirs”, that is, Those of poor people, is there any consensus about how much primacy should be given to “theirs”? Whose words, whose meanings, whose concepts, whose values, whose concerns, and whose priorities should prevail, how much, in what circumstances? If empowerment is serious, does it not have to be mainly, if not often entirely, theirs?

B. Words, meanings and concepts

Our words, and the meanings we give them as concepts, present problems to resolve. Here are some semi-rhetorical questions. The main problem words are *measurement* and *poverty*.

- *Measurement* is problematic as a word. To some, measurement is limited to numbers, measuring income, nutritional status, infant mortality, school attendance...and the like, in a precise and “scientific” mode. To others it includes appraisal and assessment which do not or need not include numbers. (The session at which these notes were presented began as “assessment” and became “measurement”). For clarity, should *measurement* be limited to the first, narrower, meaning which finds expression in precise numbers?
- *Poverty* is an amoeba word, taking many shapes, meaning different things to different people at different times. Has this caused misunderstandings and at times false consensus? Should we be clear what we want it to mean?
- As a start, whenever reference is to low income or low consumption (as what has been measured) should we use the terms *income-poverty*, *income-poor*, *consumption-poverty*, and *consumption-poor*?
- Should *poverty* be used to refer, as in much common usage, to material lack of physical necessities, assets and income? It would then be distinguished from other dimensions of deprivation with which it interacts such as sickness and disability, isolation, insecurity and vulnerability, powerlessness, and humiliation. *Poverty* and *wealth* would then be polar opposites. If poverty is used to mean more than material lack, should that be clearly stated?

- Good conditions of living and being are increasingly described as *wellbeing*.. This is reinforced and justified because wellbeing is the English word closest to the words and meanings which poor people tend to use in participatory appraisals. Should the opposites of *wellbeing* - bad conditions of living and being, bad quality of life - be described not as poverty, but as *illbeing* or *deprivation* which will usually include poverty?
- Should we in any case consult widely with those who suffer illbeing or deprivation about their words and concepts to see how best to match theirs with ours, or so that we can adopt theirs at least where theirs fit?

C. Normal professionalism and participatory methodologies

As professionals, our normal beliefs and actions result from many influences, including:

- personal and professional training/conditioning and skills
- the methodologies with which we are familiar and comfortable
- words, concepts and systems of measurement
- personal and professional interests
- the nature of interactions which take place between poor and powerless people and others with power, and how what comes from those interactions is filtered and reformulated as it is fed upwards. All power deceives.

In various ways these can combine to mislead us. Further, we have predispositions to generate, select and believe certain types of evidence (For example I know I have a tendency to note and select data which suggest other things than income matter to poor people, and that sustains and reinforces what I want to believe).

But this is a brilliantly exciting time to be alive as a development professional. Self-critical awareness is rising on the agenda, questioning how and what we know, and examining how we get things wrong. And linked with and supporting this, participatory methodologies like PRA have opened up much new ground. It is still not generally understood just how much participatory methodologies can:

- enable poor (and non-literate) people to map, model, diagram, list, compare, rank, score, identify causal linkages and so on, representing the astonishing detail and complexity of their realities.
- empower poor people to do their own appraisal, analysis, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (Estrella and Gaventa 1998; Guijt and Gaventa 1998). It is much more than was thought.
- generate numbers (the idea that participatory always meant qualitative, and could not lead to quantification has now been contradicted by innumerable examples, not least social mapping by members of communities). Participatory methods have also generated commensurable numbers on a large scale.

Nor is it yet fully appreciated how much all this depends on the personal dimension of the behaviour, attitudes and commitment of facilitators (see Kumar 1997).

D. Participatory Orientations: Dimensions of Change

- Participatory approaches cannot be separated out from dimensions which are institutional, professional and personal
- Institutionally, a participatory pro-poor orientation requires changes in the cultures and management of development organisations, their structures, incentives and rewards, procedures, forms of interaction.....(Blackburn with Holland 1998; Scherler and others 1998).

- Professionally, a participatory pro-poor orientation requires paradigmatic changes in concepts, values, behaviours and methods, and self-critical epistemological awareness, questioning how we come to know what we think we know
- A participatory pro-poor orientation requires, above all, personal change and commitment, indicating the primacy of the personal in development (see e.g. Chambers 1997)

3. Frontiers

The WDR 2000/1 is pushing at frontiers, methodologically, in understanding, and for policy. Beyond the points above under “consensus” and “no consensus yet”, there are big areas which cry out for participatory innovation and learning. These include:

- how to combine scale and representativeness optimally with the advantages of participatory approaches, behaviours and methods
- how to move from participatory expressions of the values, needs and priorities of the poor to changes in policy
- how to make normal bureaucracies more participatory
- how to transform professional values and training
- how to enable people with power to find fulfillment in disempowering themselves
- how to enhance self-critical awareness among those who are disabled by power, isolation and dominant professionalism
- how to achieve changes in personal awareness, commitment and actions so that pro-poor policies are actually implemented and poor people actually benefit in ways which they value (For more detail on these last five bullet points see Chambers 1998)

The last two points are the crux. Good pro-poor policies have to be grounded in reality and actually implemented. Good pro-poor policies which are not implemented, or the benefits of which are captured by the non-poor, are bad pro-poor policies. Every link in the long causal chains, from participatory approaches to insights into the realities of the poor, to WDR2000/1, to policy changes, to actual benefits to the poor, is mediated by people. What happens or does not happen depends on them, their perceptions, their commitments and their actions.

4. A Challenge and an Opportunity

If then personal commitment and action by many actors will determine the adoption and implementation (or non-adoption and non-implementation) of every recommendation and policy prescription in the report, could WDR2000/1 be wonderfully bold? Could it start with critical reflection on how professional realities are formed? Could it conclude with the primacy of the personal?

Is it a delusion, a fond fantasy, to see here an opportunity for a new realism to inform development in the 21st century, with potentially vast benefits for the poor? Could two additions to the Very First Cut outline do the job?

- On the first pages of the report, a section of reflective self-criticism on how and why professional realities and views and concepts of poverty and of the conditions of poor people have often been so wrong and missed so much. This would lead naturally into the participatory processes through which the voices and realities of the poor will

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Scherler, C., R. Forster, O. Karkoschka and M. Kitz eds 1998 Beyond the Tool Kit: Experiences with institutionalizing participatory approaches of GTZ supported projects in rural areas, GTZ, Postfach 5180, D-65726, Eschborn, Germany

Shah, Meera and Khadija Bourarach 1995 Participatory Assessment of Women’s Problems and Concerns in Morocco, Report submitted to the World Bank.